




Give yourself a break: Self-compassion mediates insecure attachment and divorce maladjustment among Iranian women

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Abstract

Research suggests that multiple psychological factors are associated with divorce adjustment (DA). However, the mechanisms by which these factors affect DA lack clarity. Accordingly, this study examined associations between attachment styles and divorce adjustment with self-compassion as a potential mediator. Cultural context of DA is considered. A total of 304 Iranian divorced women completed a series of self-rating questionnaires covering levels of adult attachment styles, self-compassion components, and indicators of divorce adjustment. Higher scores of attachment security and lower levels of attachment anxiety and avoidance were associated with higher levels of divorce adjustment and self-compassion, and higher levels of self-compassion were associated

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with better DA. Through Confirmatory Factor Analyses and Structural Equation Modeling, the trimmed model showed that self-compassion partially mediated attachment anxiety and fully mediated attachment avoidance as predictors of poorer divorce adjustment (or greater maladjustment, based on feelings of self-worth, grief, and self-anger subscales of DA). Self-compassion appears to be a key factor in how Iranian women adjusted to divorce, particularly those women with insecure adult attachment styles. Cultivating self-compassion could be an effective way to help counter negative attachment patterns. The role of Iranian cultural characteristics in perceptions and stress related to marriage and post-divorce adjustment is discussed.

Keywords

Attachment styles, self-compassion, divorce adjustment, Iranian women, mediation effects

Introduction

Divorce rates are increasing in many non-western countries, including Iran (Yahyazadeh & Khedri, 2015; Yousefi et al., 2019). Divorce is typically a highly stressful life event in adulthood and requires significant adjustment (Davarinejad et al., 2017, 2021; Kulik & Heine-Cohen, 2011). Scholarship has identified consequences of divorce for people from various parts of the world, including Iran, such as high financial pressures, loss of social support and close friends, and forced relocation (Ahmadi et al., 2018; Asanjarani et al., 2017; Brown & Ryan, 2003; Cunningham & Waldock, 2016; Navabinejad et al., 2017). However, substantive variation has been noted in how well divorced people adjust to divorce-related stresses (Boss et al., 2016; Davarinejad et al., 2021; Kulik & Heine-Cohen, 2011). Personal characteristics, family dynamics, and broader cultural factors tend to shape how people perceive and thus cope with individual and relational stress (Boss et al., 2016). The current study investigated how attachment styles associate with women's divorce adjustment, while considering self-compassion as a key mediator, within an Iranian cultural context.

Explaining variation in divorce adjustment

Divorce adjustment (DA) refers to what ordinary people experiences after formal divorce. One of the most influential theories of DA (Fisher, 1977) conceptualizes it as pertaining to multiple dimensions: (1) feelings of self-worth, which refer to changes that happen in self-image and feelings of being valued; (2) disentanglement from the love relationship, which refers to continuing emotional attachment to and love toward the ex-spouse; (3) social self-worth, which addresses the expression of the divorce experiences with others and to establishing new social connections; (4) rebuilding social trust, which is the propensity to date and engage in sexual activity in new relationships; (5) symptoms of grief, which includes negative emotional expression (loneliness, depression, fear, crying, and

insecurity) or physical distress (sleeping and eating specific dysfunctions, exhaustion); and (6) feeling of self-anger, which refers to feeling blame or guilt and feeling anger toward the ex-spouses (Fisher, 1977; Fisher & Alberti, 2016; Guzmán-González et al., 2017). Four of the dimensions address positive aspect of divorce adjustment (feelings of self-worth, disentanglement from the love relationship, rebuilding social trust, and social self-worth) and the two others reflect a negative divorce adjustment (symptoms of grief and feeling of self-anger).

DA is generally challenging, even for those who have certain outward advantages such as good health, higher education, and wealth (Fisher & Alberti, 2016). Nevertheless, some individuals or groups tend to struggle more than others. Divorced women in particular experience income decline (Amato & Previti, 2003; Bowen & Jensen, 2017; Cunningham & Waldock, 2016; Fasaie & Isari, 2012) and have been found to have poorer adjustment (Leopold, 2018). Being older and less educated are also risk factors for poor DA (Davarinejad et al., 2021; Wang & Amato, 2000; Yilmaz & Fişiloglu, 2005). Economic stability has at times predicted DA (Amato, 2000; Amato & Previti, 2003; Oygard, 2004; Wang & Amato, 2000) but at other times has not (Yárnoz-Yaben, 2009; Yousefi et al., 2019). Other inconsistent results have emerged regarding number of children, length of marital life, length of divorced years, and job status of divorced women as they pertain to DA (Asanjarani et al., 2018a; 2018b; Bursik, 1991; Cavapozzi et al., 2019; Davarinejad et al., 2021; Fattahian et al., 2017; Ferraro et al., 2016; Islam & Naz, 2018; Kitson, 2013). Some of these factors could be more relevant to specific situations and cultural contexts.

According to human basic values theory (Schwartz, 2017), the high levels of embeddedness and hierarchy in Iranian culture (Delkhamoush, 2005, 2009, 2014), for example, can lead to positive viewpoints and strong commitments to getting married. In Iran, actively maintaining a marriage and remaining in an undesirable marriage have been strong social values and norms. Consequently, divorce is viewed as a disgraceful, which has far-reaching consequences, especially for women. Divorced Iranian women typically lose their main financial resource and confront social-cultural stress after a divorce due to divorce stigma. Furthermore, cultural expectations enable men to remarry immediately, and they typically value virginity in a new bride. Divorced women often work to provide for themselves, but gender inequality limits employment opportunities for women (Asanjarani et al., 2018b; Barikani et al., 2012; Fasaie & Isari, 2012). Hence, Iranian women face stressors that have become less common or familiar in other, particularly Western cultures. Qualitative research on Iranian women indicates DA is indeed difficult due in part to cultural influences (Asanjarani et al., 2017; Navabinejad et al., 2017; Zare et al., 2017), and limited quantitative research on Iranian women either lacks a more comprehensive approach toward measuring DA or the variables of interest to the current study (e.g., Davarinejad et al., 2021; Yousefi et al., 2019).

Attachment and divorce adjustment

Attachment theory offers a helpful framework for understanding people's capacity to connect with others and develop supportive relationships as main coping resources (Feeney & Monin, 2008; Feeney, 1996; Feeney & Noller, 2004; Hazan & Shaver, 1994).

Specifically, distinct styles of attachment originate in early childhood and shape attachment behaviors during adulthood. *Attachment anxiety* is characteristic of individuals who experienced inconsistent parenting as children and as adults tend to have exaggerated reactions to distress as a mean to gain others' comfort and support (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005; Mikulincer et al., 2003). Such individuals also view themselves as flawed and less lovable or deserving of comfort than others (Pietromonaco & Barrett, 1997). *Attachment avoidance* is characteristic of individuals whose parents had been unresponsive to their childhood needs and who as adults repress their emotions and withdraw from intimate relationships (Mikulincer et al., 2003; Wei et al., 2011). They typically view others as untrustworthy or undependable (Pietromonaco & Barrett, 2000). Finally, *Attachment security* is characteristics of individuals who had warm, consistent parenting and as adults view themselves and others positively (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Brennan & Shaver, 1998). Adult attachment styles could be integral to how divorced people view themselves, former spouses, and potential mates while coping with the challenges of divorce.

Research suggests that adult attachment styles contribute to interpersonal differences in divorce adjustment in various countries. For example, attachment anxiety and avoidance have negatively correlated with DA, while attachment security and attachment avoidance predicted higher levels of DA (Yármoz-Yaben, 2010). However, attachment styles could also have an indirect effect on DA in that they contribute to other ways that people perceive themselves. For example, insecure individuals might disproportionately blame themselves for the divorce, or otherwise be hypercritical of one's self, resulting in further distress.

Self-compassion as a mediator for divorce adjustment

Self-compassion involves being caring and compassionate to one's self during instances of perceived inadequacy, failure, or general suffering (Bluth & Neff, 2018; Neff et al., 2019). According to Neff (Neff, 2003), the construct of self-compassion is composed of three main elements. The first element—self-kindness versus self-judgment—entails being warm toward oneself when encountering pain and personal shortcomings instead of hurting oneself with denial or self-criticism. The second component—common humanity versus isolation—involves recognizing that suffering and personal failure are part of the shared human experience and should not lead to isolation. The third component—mindfulness versus over-identification—requires a balanced approach to negative emotions so that they are neither suppressed nor exaggerated. Negative thoughts and emotions are observed with openness and mindful awareness. Mindfulness is a non-judgmental, receptive mind state in which individuals observe their thoughts and feelings as they are without trying to suppress or deny them (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Conversely, becoming “over-identified” (or ruminating) with mental or emotional challenges can result in aversive reactions (Bishop et al., 2004).

Self-compassionate individuals experience greater psychological health than those who lack self-compassion. For example, self-compassion is positively associated with life satisfaction, wisdom, happiness, optimism, curiosity, learning goals, social connectedness,

personal responsibility, and emotional resilience; at the same time, it is associated with a lower tendency for self-criticism, depression, anxiety, rumination, thought suppression, perfectionism, and disordered eating attitudes (Adams & Leary, 2007; Conversano et al., 2020; Dunne et al., 2018; Leary et al., 2007; Neff & McGehee, 2010; Sirois et al., 2015). Self-compassion can be viewed as an emotional regulation strategy in which negative feelings are held in awareness with kindness and a sense of shared common humanity (Homan, 2016; Neff, 2004). This strategy would thus help transform negative feelings into positive feelings (Wei et al., 2011). Hence, it would be expected that self-compassion helps individuals cultivate the elements of DA since positive DA incorporates life satisfaction, happiness, optimism, emotional resilience, and social bonding (Quinney & Fouts, 2004; Yárnoz et al., 2008) in the face of adversity. Elements of DA that are most closely related to feelings toward one's self (e.g., self-worth, grief, and anger) seem most relevant to self-compassion because of their shared self-focus.

Research in Iran has similarly shown that self-compassion is an important variable to the extent that a divorced person blames oneself for divorce (Ghorbani et al., 2017a, 2017b). Studies show that self-compassion is associated with outcomes that may help buffer against the stressors of divorce, including resilience (Alizadeh et al., 2018), less depression (Madmoli et al., 2019), positive mental health (Ghorbani et al., 2018), emotional and spiritual intelligence (Khodabakhshi Koolaei et al., 2019), and self-care behaviors (Abdollahi et al., 2020). In a country like Iran that has strong negative attitudes and mores regarding divorced women, self-compassion could be especially salient for DA.

Neff and McGehee (2010) postulated that family experiences might play a fundamental role in developing of self-compassion in adulthood. Specifically, in times of suffering and pain or failure, how people treat themselves may be informed by early attachments to caregivers. Consistent care and support that fosters secure attachment should nurture self-compassion (Wei et al., 2011). In contrast, attachment anxiety and avoidance correspond with negative perceptions of one's self or romantic partner (Pietromonaco & Barrett, 2000) and with self-criticism (Cantazaro & Wei, 2010; Joeng et al., 2017). Negative perceptions of the self can lead to excessive neediness for validation from others (Wei et al., 2005) and a struggle to find internal resources to generate and promote self-compassion (Neff & McGehee, 2010; Pepping et al., 2015). Indeed, research has found connections between an anxious attachment style and less self-compassion (Joeng et al., 2017; Raque-Bogdan et al., 2016; Wei et al., 2011).

The potential relationship between attachment avoidance and self-compassion appears more complex. Attachment avoidance tends to associate with more negative views of others but can also coexist with positive views of the self (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Pietromonaco & Barrett, 2000). However, some scholars have argued that this positive view of oneself differs qualitatively from the positive view had among securely attached people (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005; Mikulincer et al., 2003). For example, attachment avoidance could include a positive view of the self because of defensive denial or hidden internal sense of insecurity (Wei et al., 2011) that promotes self-compassion. Alternatively, avoidant individuals might have learned to view themselves positively to bolster self-reliance since others cannot be trusted. They could hold excessively high standards for themselves, leading to less self-compassion when they inevitably fall short. Most extant research on this

issue, however, has found negative associations between attachment avoidance and self-compassion (Arambasic et al., 2019; Pepping et al., 2015; Raque-Bogdan et al., 2016; Wei et al., 2005, 2011).

Some research has indicated that self-compassion mediates the connection between attachment styles and some outcomes. For example, scholars have shown that self-compassion mediated adult attachment styles and depression (Murray et al., 2021), psychological and physical health (Raque-Bogdan et al., 2016), and subjective well-being (Wei et al., 2011). Other researchers have shown that self-compassion mediated bullying and shame in adulthood (Beduna & Perrone-McGovern, 2019), and the relationship between work stress and mental health (Ghorbani et al., 2018).

The current study

The following research questions guided our analyses: First, to what extent is self-compassion related to DA? Second, to what extent are attachment styles related to DA. Third, to what extent do attachment styles and self-compassion dimensions uniquely predict the distinct dimensions of DA? Fourth, to what extent does self-compassion mediate the relationship between attachment styles and DA? Based on the reviewed theory and research, we hypothesized the following:

H1. Secure attachment styles and self-compassion will associate with more positive DA among divorced Iranian women.

H2. Avoidant and ambivalent attachment styles and lower levels of self-compassion will associate with more negative DA (or greater maladjustment) among divorced Iranian women.

H3. Self-compassion should at least partially and fully mediate associations between attachment styles and DA. Given that some of the dimensions of DA arguably appear more relevant to self-compassion—namely, feeling of self-worth, symptoms of grief, and feeling of self-anger, we suspect that a final model integrating self-worth as a variable could result in a reduced latent measure of DA favoring those self-oriented dimensions.

The current study has the potential to contribute to better understanding of the psychological mechanisms underlying DA, especially within an under-studied cultural context of Iran. Accounting for both attachment and self-compassion could help explain more variance in DA. Results could help focus efforts on reducing distresses after divorce.

Method

Procedure

Divorced women from Kermanshah, Iran, were recruited through the use of flyers posted at a community center for divorced and widowed women (Welfare Organization of Iran) and faculty members from two local universities inviting students to encourage divorce acquaintances or family members to participate. Participants were required to have been divorced for at least 6 months from a marriage that lasted at least 6 months, and could not be receiving therapeutic

interventions at the time. Eligible participants were contacted by telephone and a meeting was scheduled to fully introduce the study. At the meeting, the purpose of the research was reiterated, consent forms were signed, and questionnaires were distributed. Completed questionnaires were to be returned at a meeting 5 days later. Participants were not reimbursed for their participation. The ethics committee of the Kermanshah University of Medical Sciences (KUMS; Kermanshah, Iran) approved the study which was conducted in accordance with the rules laid down in the seventh and current edition (2013) of the Declaration of Helsinki.

Sample

Out of 370 questionnaires, 320 were returned (a response rate of 85%). Of the returned questionnaires, 16 were eliminated because they did not meet the inclusion criteria, resulting in a final sample of 304 divorced women (see [Table 1](#) for sample characteristics).

Measures

Participants reported their age, education (primary/guidance school, diploma, bachelor, master's/doctorate degree), length of prior marriage, months since the divorce, number of

Table 1. Descriptive Statistical Overview of Sociodemographic Information (N = 304).

	Statistics	
	Mean (SD)	Range
Age (years)	34.34 (6.53)	19–50
Length of marriage (years)	8.48 (4.31)	1–25
Length of time since divorce (years)	3.44 (1.14)	1–6
Number of children	N (%)	
0	130 (42.76)	
1	119 (39.14)	
2	42 (13.81)	
3	13 (4.27)	
>3	0	
Marriage style		
Arranged	190 (62.52)	
Love-based	114 (37.51)	
Job status		
Housewife	180 (59.21)	
Employed	124 (40.79)	
Education		
Less than high school	33 (10.85)	
High school diploma	115 (37.83)	
Bachelor's degree	131 (43.09)	
Master's/doctorate degree	25 (8.22)	

children, marriage style (arranged vs. love-based), and job status (housewife vs. employed). Dummy variables were created for the dichotomous variables.

Fisher Divorce Adjustment Scale

Participants completed the Fisher Divorce Adjustment Scale (FDAS; (Fisher, 1977). Asanjarani et al. (2017) translated the questionnaire into the Farsi/Persian version with satisfactory psychometric properties. The 100 items have response options on 5-point scales with the anchor points 1 (almost never) to 5 (almost always), with higher scores reflecting a better adjustment with divorce. The instrument assesses six dimensions of divorce adjustment: (1) feeling of self-worth; ($\alpha = 0.82$)—the higher the score, the less negative attitude toward herself and more acceptance of herself as a unique person (sample item: “It is easy for me to accept being alone”); (2) disentanglement from love relationship; ($\alpha = 0.86$)—the higher the score, the more cognitively and emotionally detached she was from her ex-spouse (sample item: “I feel emotionally separated from my ex-husband”); (3) social self-worth; ($\alpha = 0.70$)—the higher the score, the less she experienced biased social interactions and the less social rejection or deprivations (sample item: “It is easy for me to tell others that I am separated from my husband”); (4) rebuilding social trust; ($\alpha = 0.86$)—the higher the score, the more she was able to trust others for creating a close relationships (sample item: “I’m afraid of trusting people who may become my husband in the future”); (5) symptoms of grief; ($\alpha = 0.89$)—the higher the score, the more she displayed symptoms and signs of grief and depression (sample item: “I feel physically and mentally tired all day”); (6) feeling of self-anger; ($\alpha = 0.89$)—the higher the score, the more she experienced feeling of revenge and anger toward her ex-spouse, and more feelings of guilt toward herself (sample item: “I hope my ex-husband suffers as much emotionally as I do”).

Self-Compassion Scale–Short Form

The 12-item Self-Compassion Scale–Short Form (SCS-SF) (Raes et al., 2011) was translated into Farsi/Persian with satisfactory psychometric properties (Ghorbani et al. (2012). Participants are directed to rate how often (ranging from 1 “almost never” to 5, “almost always”) they behave in the manner indicated by each of the items. A sample item is, “I try to be loving towards myself when I’m feeling emotional pain.” The SCS-SF consists of three subscales, each with items to represent opposite poles of each subscale: Self-Kindness (two items) versus Self-Judgment (two items), Common Humanity (two items) versus Isolation (two items), and Mindfulness (two items) versus Over-Identified (two items). In the current study, the total score of the SCS was used in the CFA and SEM analysis. A higher score indicated a higher level of self-compassion. The coefficient alpha of the scale was 0.88.

Revised Adult Attachment Scale

To assess adult attachment styles, we used Revised Adult Attachment Scale (RAAS) (Collins & Read, 1990), translated in to Farsi/Persian by Sharifi et al. (2012). The Persian

RAAS demonstrates adequate convergent validity and test-retest reliability (Sharifi et al., 2012). The RAAS is a self-rating scale and consists of 18 items and assesses three attachment styles (Secure, Avoidant, and Ambivalent). Answers are given with a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all characteristic of me) to 5 (very characteristic of me). The test-retest reliability of RAAS was reported 0.95, and Cronbach's alpha was reported 0.82, 0.81, and 0.78, respectively, for secure, avoidant, and ambivalent attachment styles (Sharifi et al., 2012). The CFA and SEM would determine the fit of the items with their respective latent variables.

Statistical analysis

First, bivariate correlations were computed between DA indicators (feelings of self-worth, disentanglement from the love relationship, social self-worth, rebuilding social trust, symptoms of grief, feeling of self-anger), dimensions of self-compassion (self-kindness, self-judgment, common humanity, isolation, mindfulness, over-identification), and styles of adult attachment (secure, avoidant, ambivalent). Second, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed to test the parameters of expected latent variables (attachment styles, self-compassion, and divorce adjustment). Third, a Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) analysis was executed, with DA as the dependent variable, attachment styles as predictor variables, and Self-Compassion as a mediator variable. The indirect effect of Attachment Styles via mediating role of self-compassion on DA was tested. The nominal level of statistical significance was set as $\alpha < .05$. Statistical computations were performed with SPSS and AMOS 25.0 (IBM Corporation, Armonk, NY, USA) for apple Mac.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Table 2 reports the descriptive statistics and correlation coefficients for divorce adjustment indicators, self-compassion indicators, and attachment styles. The study used the maximum likelihood method, which requires the assumption of normality, to test the models. The multivariate normality test was used to examine whether the data in the present study met the normality hypothesis. The result of the multivariate normality test showed that the data were not multivariate normal. As a consequence, the scaled chi-square statistic developed by Satorra and Bentler (1988) was used to adjust the impacts of non-normality on the final results.

H1. Secure attachment style and self-compassion will associate with more positive DA among divorced Iranian women. The correlation matrix (Table 2) shows preliminary and partial support for the first hypothesis. While secure attachment only correlated with one of the six indicators of self-compassion (less over identification), secure attachment correlated positively with three of the DA subscales (feels of self-worth, disentanglement, and rebuilding social trust). In addition, the results show that the indicators of higher levels of

Table 2. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Among the Variables.

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1. Attachment security	2.87	0.54	—														
2. Attachment avoidance	3.33	1.02	-.13*	—													
3. Attachment anxiety	2.83	1.12	-.28**	.52**	—												
4. Self-kindness	3.34	0.83	.09	.02	.06	—											
5. Self-judgment	3.02	0.83	.10	.45**	.46**	-.15**	—										
6. Common humanity (CH)	3.18	0.85	-.01	.04	-.01	.32**	-.22**	—									
7. Isolation	2.77	0.93	.05	.54**	.42**	-.11	.32**	.02	—								
8. Mindfulness	3.41	0.82	-.05	-.17**	-.08	.31**	-.02	.33**	-.18**	—							
9. Over identification	2.97	0.99	-.23**	.57**	.51**	-.09	.55**	-.10	.70**	-.31**	—						
10. Feeling of self-worth	2.66	0.41	.20**	-.37**	-.35**	.43**	-.15**	.30**	-.34**	.46**	-.42**	—					
11. Disentanglement	2.63	0.34	.15**	-.24**	-.28**	.02	-.28**	.05	-.20**	.16**	-.22**	.37**	—				
12. Social self-worth (SSW)	2.96	0.37	.07	-.20**	-.20**	.01	-.06	.01	-.33**	-.10	.19**	.15**	-.03	—			
13. Rebuilding social trust	3.12	0.53	.16**	-.42**	-.53**	.05	-.39**	.17**	-.43**	.19**	-.60**	.37**	.36**	-.08	—		
14. Symptoms of grief	2.43	0.59	-.08	.42**	.52**	-.11*	.37**	-.08	.48**	-.33**	.60**	.65**	.60**	-.06	.55**	—	
15. Feeling of self-anger	2.95	0.55	-.11	.46**	.51**	-.14*	.36**	.03	.45**	-.24**	.54**	.47**	.45**	-.05	.58**	.66**	—

** $p < 0.01$ * $p < 0.05$.

self-compassion (i.e. self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness) correlated positively with some of adaptive (positive) aspects of DA (feeling of self-worth, disentanglement from love relationship, social self-worth, and rebuilding social trust). Reversely, the indicators of lower levels of self-compassion (i.e. self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification) correlated negatively with some of adaptive aspects of DA (feeling of self-worth, disentanglement from love relationship, social self-worth, and rebuilding social trust).

H2. Avoidant and ambivalent attachment styles and lower levels of self-compassion will associate with more negative DA (or greater maladjustment) among divorced Iranian women. The results of [Table 2](#) indicate that consistent with the second hypothesis, attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance correlated with half or more of the indicators of self-compassion and all of the dimensions of DA in the expected direction (i.e. worse DA). Moreover, the indicators of higher levels of self-compassion (i.e. self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness) correlated negatively with maladaptive (negative) aspects of DA (symptoms of grief and feeling of self-anger). On the other hand, the indicators of lower levels of self-compassion (i.e. self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification) correlated positively with maladaptive aspects of DA (symptoms of grief and feeling of self-anger).

H3. Self-compassion should at least partially and fully mediate associations between attachment styles and DA. Regarding hypothesis 3 (mediation effects), measurement and structural models were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM).

Measurement models

Scholars have suggested conducting a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to examine whether the measurement models provide an acceptable fit to the data ([Anderson & Gerbing, 1988](#); [Meyers et al., 2016](#)). Once an acceptable measurement model is developed, then the structural model can be examined ([Wei et al., 2011](#)). We also followed the recommendation of [Meyers et al. \(2016\)](#) to compare our hypothesized partially mediated structural model with a fully mediated structural model to select the best fitting model. These comparisons between the models were estimated using the maximum likelihood in the AMOS 25 program ([Meyers et al., 2016](#); [Wei et al., 2011](#)). [Meyers et al. \(2016\)](#) recommended a cut-off value .95 or greater for Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Normed Fit Index (NFI), Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI), Incremental Fit Index (IFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), in combination with cut-off value .08 or less for standardized root mean squared residual (SRMR), and root mean squared error of approximation (RMSEA) to evaluate model fit.

According to Baron and Kenny (1986) and [Meyers et al. \(2016\)](#), one of the statistical presuppositions necessary for the existence of a mediator relationship between variables (third hypothesis) is that the regression of the predictor variable on the mediator variable becomes significant. The results of regression analysis showed that the regression of attachment security on self-compassion was not significant, but the regression of attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety on self-compassion was significant (the

measurement model indicated a poor model fit with attachment security included). As a result, the attachment security variable was removed from the measurement models and structural models. These results provided further evidence against the first hypothesis that secure attachment would associate with self-compassion.

The result of the measurement model composed of attachment avoidance, attachment anxiety, self-compassion subscales, and DA was a poor fit. Based on suggested modification indices in AMOS, and our suspicion that self-compassion would be more relevant to the more self-oriented elements of DA, we trimmed the model by removing the disentanglement from the love relationship, social self-worth, and rebuilding social trust dimensions, which also tended to have the lowest loadings from the latent DA variable. With three indicators of DA remaining (feelings of self-worth, symptoms of grief, and feelings of self-anger), a satisfactory model fit was achieved. With reverse coding of feelings of self-worth, DA was reconceptualized as divorce maladjustment (DMA). After correlations among the latent variables were all statistically significant ($p < .001$; see Table 3), lending general support to the second hypothesis with the stated caveat.

Structural models

To test the third hypothesis (self-compassion mediating attachment and DA), a model was tested that considered attachment styles as independent variables, self-compassion as a mediator variable, and DMA as the outcome variable. Then we conducted SEM analyses using CFA and Path analyses for presentation and testing a “causal model” between predictor (and mediators) variables and dependent variable. Only measures achieving an acceptable level of reliability were used as the basis for configuring a structural model. Maximum likelihood was used as the estimation method.

The model yielded a good fit to the data (Figure 1). Although the chi-square value was statistically significant, the GFI, CFI, NFI, IFI, and TLI were .918, .925, .907, .926, and .888, respectively, and the SRMR and RMSEA were .050 and .108 [90% CI (.092–.125)], respectively. Figure 1 presents the standardized coefficients and squared multiple correlations associated with the model. The paths from attachment anxiety to self-compassion (standardized path coefficient = $-.176$, unstandardized path coefficient = $-.081$ with a standard error of $.040$, $p = .043$), from attachment anxiety to DMA (standardized path coefficient = $.303$, unstandardized path coefficient = $.076$ with a

Table 3. Correlations Among Variables in the Measurement Model.

Latent variable	1	2	3	4
1. Attachment avoidance	_____			
2. Attachment anxiety	.52**	_____		
3. Self-compassion	-.63**	-.56**	_____	
4. Divorce maladjustment	.49**	.55**	-.60**	_____

** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

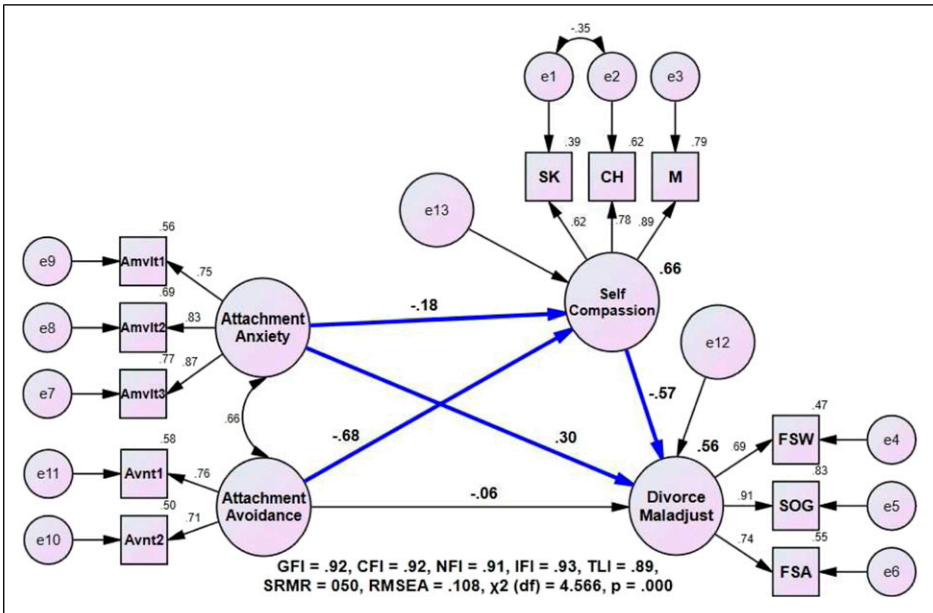


Figure 1. Standardized coefficients and squared multiple correlations for the structural model of divorce maladjustment. Note. SK = self-kindness, CH = common humanity, M = mindfulness, FSW = feeling of self-worth, SOG = symptoms of grief, and FSA = feeling of self-anger.

standard error of .020, $p < .001$), from attachment avoidance to self-compassion (standardized path coefficient = $-.684$, unstandardized path coefficient = $-.457$ with a standard error of .078, $p < .001$), and from self-compassion to DMA (standardized path coefficient = $-.568$, unstandardized path coefficient = $-.309$ with a standard error of .069, $p < .001$), were all statistically significant. But, the path from attachment avoidance to divorce maladjustment (DMA) (standardized path coefficient = $-.060$, unstandardized path coefficient = $-.022$ with a standard error of .048, $p = .650$) was not statistically significant. Approximately 56% and 66% of the variance of DMA and self-compassion was explained by model configuration.

Direct and indirect effects of attachment anxiety on DMA, with self-compassion as mediating variable

To examine in more detail the mediating role of self-compassion, and to isolate the unique influence of each of the two highly correlated predictor variables, we tested separate models for each predictor variable. The latent variables in the models were constructed the same way as in the model above.

The model yielded a very good fit with the data. Although the chi-square value was statistically significant (χ^2 (df) = 3.248, $p = .000$), the GFI, CFI, NFI, IFI, and TLI were

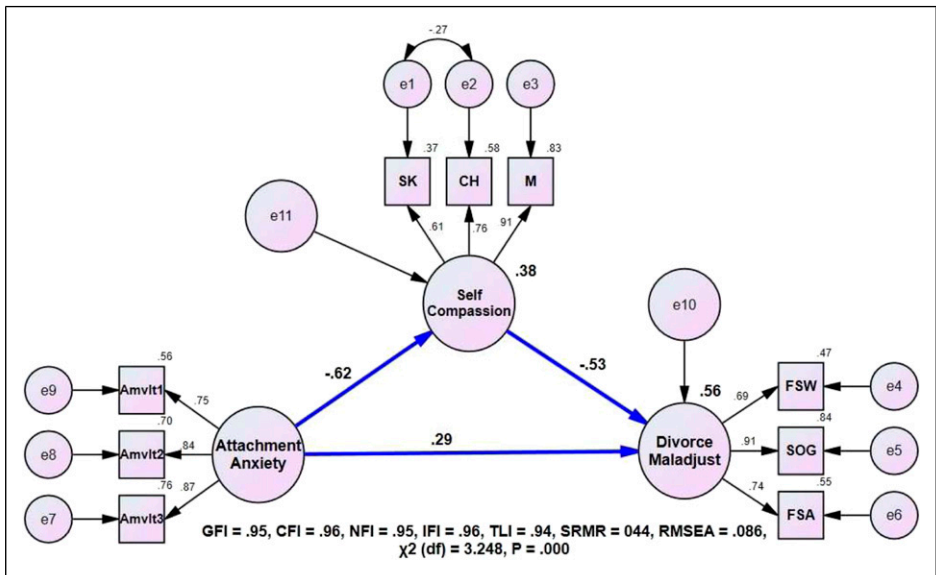


Figure 2. Standardized coefficients and squared multiple correlations for the structural model of attachment anxiety. Note. SK = self-kindness, CH = common humanity, M = mindfulness, FSW = feeling of self-worth, SOG = symptoms of grief, and FSA = feeling of self-anger.

.948, .963, .948, .964, and .942, respectively, and the RMSR and RMSEA were .044 and .086 [90% CI (.065–.108)], respectively. Figure 2 presents the standardized coefficients and squared multiple correlations associated with the model. The path from attachment anxiety to DMA (standardized path coefficient = .292, unstandardized path coefficient = .073 with a standard error of .018, $p < .001$), from attachment anxiety to self-compassion (standardized path coefficient = $-.616$, unstandardized path coefficient = $-.277$ with a standard error of .035, $p < .001$), and from self-compassion to DMA (standardized path coefficient = $-.531$, unstandardized path coefficient = $-.297$, with a standard error of .048, $p < .001$), were statistically significant. The Aroian test (Aroian, 1947), one variation of the Sobel test (Sobel, 1986) family, was used to evaluate the statistical significance of the indirect effect, and it showed that the indirect effect of attachment anxiety through self-compassion to DMA was statistically significant ($z = 4.85$, $p < .001$). Approximately 56% and 38% of the variance of (DMA and self-compassion) was explained by model configuration, respectively.

Next, the unmediated model (in which attachment anxiety predicted divorce maladjustment (DMA) in isolation) was evaluated to test for mediation. In the unmediated model, the direct path between attachment anxiety and divorce maladjustment (DMA) was statistically significant (standardized path coefficient = .617, unstandardized path coefficient .158, with a standard error of .019, $p < .001$), and a Freedman–Schatzkin (Freedman & Schatzkin, 1992) test comparing the two coefficients verified that the direct path coefficient in the unmediated model was significantly greater than the corresponding

coefficient in the mediated model, $t(302) = 26.880, p < .001$. Thus, it appears that higher levels of attachment anxiety were associated with lower levels of self-compassion that in turn were associated with higher levels of divorce maladjustment (DMA). Based on the ratio of the strength of the standardized indirect effect to the strength of the unmediated standardized effect (.327/.617), we conclude that above half (53.13%) of the isolated direct effect of attachment anxiety on divorce maladjustment (DMA) is mediated through self-compassion.

Direct and indirect effects of attachment avoidance on DMA, with self-compassion as mediating variable

The same analytic procedures were used for the model predicting maladjustment (DMA) by attachment avoidance. The model yielded a very good fit to the data. Although the chi-square value was statistically significant ($\chi^2(df) = 2.412, p = .007$), the GFI, CFI, NFI, IFI, and TLI were .949, .947, .939, .948, and .918, respectively, and the RMSR and RMSEA were .031 and .090 [90% CI (.056-.116)], respectively. Figure 3 presents the standardized coefficients and squared multiple correlations associated with the model. The path from attachment avoidance to divorce maladjustment (DMA) (standardized path coefficient = .079, unstandardized path coefficient = .029 with a standard error of .045, $p = .529$) was not statistically significant. The path from attachment avoidance to self-compassion (standardized path coefficient = $-.799$, unstandardized path coefficient = $-.518$ with a

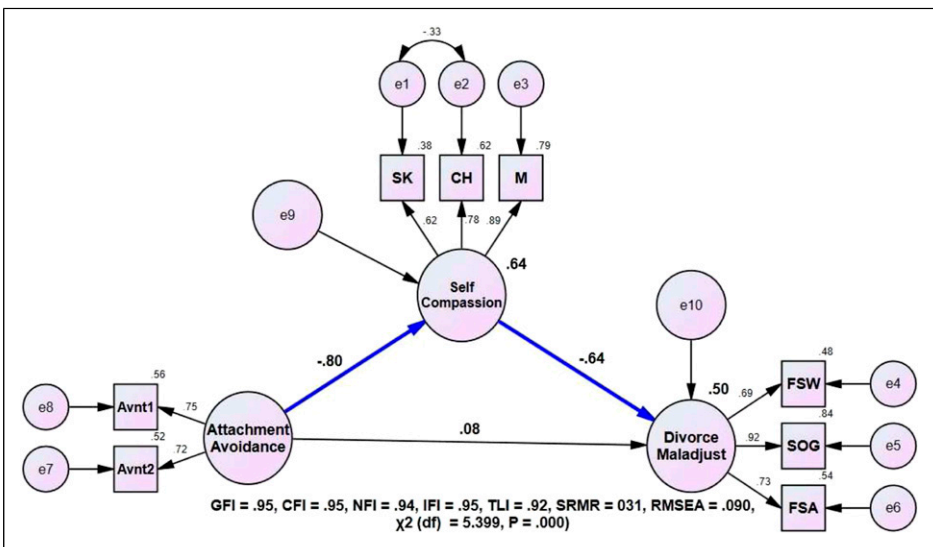


Figure 3. Standardized coefficients and squared multiple correlations for the structural model of attachment avoidance. Note. SK = self-kindness, CH = common humanity, M = mindfulness, FSW = feeling of self-worth, SOG = symptoms of grief, and FSA = feeling of self-anger.

standard error of .066, $p < .001$), and from self-compassion to divorce maladjustment (DMA) (standardized path coefficient = $-.645$, unstandardized path coefficient = $-.358$, with a standard error of .075, $p < .001$), were statistically significant. The Aroian test was used to evaluate the statistical significance of the indirect effect, and it showed that the indirect effect of attachment avoidance through self-compassion to DMA was statistically significant ($z = 4.054$, $p = .001$). Approximately 50% and 64% of the variance of divorce maladjustment (DMA) and self-compassion was explained by model configuration, respectively.

The unmediated model (in which attachment avoidance predicted divorce maladjustment (DMA) in isolation) was evaluated to test for mediation. In the unmediated model, the direct path between attachment avoidance and divorce maladjustment (DMA) was statistically significant (standardized path coefficient = $.612$, unstandardized path coefficient $.198$, with a standard error of $.031$, $p < .001$), and a Freedman–Schatzkin (Freedman & Schatzkin, 1992) test comparing the two coefficients verified that the direct path coefficient in the unmediated model was significantly greater than the corresponding coefficient in the mediated model, $t(302) = 14.736$, $p < .001$. Thus, higher levels of attachment avoidance were associated with lower levels of self-compassion that in turn were associated with higher levels of divorce maladjustment (DMA). Based on the ratio of the strength of the standardized indirect effect to the strength of the unmediated standardized effect ($.515/.612$), we may conclude most (84.15%) of the isolated direct effect of attachment avoidance on divorce maladjustment (DMA) is mediated through self-compassion. Overall, the structural model results are generally consistent with the third hypothesis, that self-compassion would mediate attachment and DA, though primarily in the case of insecure attachment styles and three specific indicators of divorce maladjustment, as suspected could be the case.

Discussion

The results of current study suggest that indicators of attachment (anxiety and avoidance) had direct associations with divorce maladjustment (DMA) and indirect associations with DMA through indicators of self-compassion for divorced women within an Iranian culture context. These findings imply a mediation effect of self-compassion, though the cross-sectional analysis is unable to confirm the temporal nature of these associations.

Nevertheless, those with a higher level of attachment anxiety appeared likely to be unkind to themselves (self-critical instead of self-kindness), exaggerate their negative experiences and feel uniquely victimized (isolation instead of common humanity), and feel overwhelmed by their painful thoughts and feelings (over-identification instead of mindfulness). That insecure attachments associate with less self-compassion has been noted by others (Murray et al., 2021; Neff & McGehee, 2010; Pepping et al., 2015; Raque-Bogdan et al., 2016; Wei et al., 2011). Similarly, others have found that self-compassion tends to benefit divorce adjustment (Neff, 2003; 2004; Sbarra et al., 2012). To expand such research, our results demonstrate that self-compassion could mediate relationships between attachment and divorce adjustment. This result may imply that even divorced women with insecure attachments might be able to alleviate some of the

challenges such attachment styles have on their DA if they can learn to be more self-compassionate.

It is important to note that the DA variable was simplified in the CFA and SEM analyses to incorporate only the feelings of self-worth, symptoms of grief, and feelings of self-anger subscales due to feedback from model fit indices and theoretical speculation. We had suspected that given the nature of some of the DA subscales that self-compassion might only be relevant for the more self-oriented elements of DA (self-worth, grief, and anger), which turned out to be the case in the measurement model. One might expect that countering negative feelings toward one's self could facilitate other types of adjustment that would thus have more indirect associations with self-compassion.

Self-compassion might help people find ways to compensate for problematic attachment styles. A large part of self-compassion is attitudinal. Self-judgment and isolating thoughts could consist with the types of negative thinking that cognitive behavioral therapy techniques can help people learn to challenge and replace with more hopeful thinking. Mindfulness techniques are of growing interest and foster less judgmental thinking. Scholars have also suggested that people who effectively self-regulate know how to set appropriate goals, engage in goal-directed behavior, monitor goal progress, and adjust one's behavior and goals as needed (Benyamini & Karademas, 2019; Hakun & Findeison, 2020). Besides minimizing self-criticism, having self-compassion tends to foster healthier living, seeking medical help when needed, and adhering to treatment recommendations (Terry and Leary, 2011), which should also increase one's capacity to address stresses of DA. As discussed in the literature review, attachment avoidance could arguably lead to self-compassion if they also associate with positive views of the self (Wei et al., 2011). However, our finding that attachment avoidance negatively predicted self-compassion is more in line with similar investigations (Murray et al., 2021; Raque-Bogdan et al., 2016; Wei et al., 2011). Self-compassion and a positive view of one's value or worth as a relationship partner (working model of self) are not identical constructs, but one could logically presume that such constructs would positively correlate. As mentioned in the literature review, some avoidant individuals arguably have a more artificially positive view of themselves driven by the need for self-reliance or to repress negative feelings (Fraley and Shaver, 2000; Wei et al., 2005), which may not be conducive to self-compassion. Because avoidance is largely driven by beliefs about other people's consistent acceptance and care, perhaps some avoidant individuals think highly enough of themselves to offer self-compassion but assess their worth as a potential relationship partner through the eyes of others—the people expected to be critical and to reject them.

The role of self-compassion in the association between attachment avoidance and divorce adjustment might be distinctive based on type of avoidance. Bartholomew and Horowitz's (1991) classification of attachment styles included two types of avoidant attachment: fearful and dismissive. Fearful avoidance appears to have commonalities with anxious attachment, which would be consistent with our findings. Also, the items in our attachment measures appear to focus more on fearful-natured attachment avoidance. Dismissive avoidance could be more conducive to a positive self-image and thus self-compassion. Further, nuanced research could address such speculation.

Self-compassion also had distinct mediating properties for the two attachment styles. For anxious attachment, above 50% of the relationship between attachment anxiety and DA was through a direct association. For attachment avoidance, however, all the significant association with DA was indirect (through self-compassion). This finding suggests that attachment avoidance is less directly connected to DA than is attachment anxiety, and could appear irrelevant altogether without mediating variables taken into consideration. Mediating variables are likely also relevant for anxious attachment, as illustrated with self-compassion. Including other mediating variables in investigations of attachment and DA could help further explain the mechanisms that tie the constructs together, some of which might be easier to manipulate (i.e., through education or therapy) than adult attachment styles.

Limitations, future research directions, and implications

Despite the novelty of findings, a number of important limitations in this study may warrant caution against generalization of results. First, we relied entirely on self-report data, so it is unknown whether the models can be replicated in observational studies in natural or clinical-counseling settings. Second, it is important to emphasize that the results from the analyses of structural equation models (SEM) are correlational in nature. Consequently, our results do not provide conclusive evidence of causal relationships among the studied variables. A longitudinal study design would have allowed the identification of the strongest causal directions. Third, though the use of an Iranian sample increases the novelty of the current study, the women's experiences of divorce were likely influenced by the specific context of Iran society in which more emphasis is placed on preserving the family than in Western countries, making the results are less internationally generalizable. Fourth, this study was limited to divorced women and the results could not be generalized to divorced men. Finally, the self-compassion construct and measure could share some conceptual overlap with elements of the DA construct. While participants were instructed to focus on their divorce when responding to the DA questions, and the self-compassion questions focused on general tendencies, it is possible that associations between DA/MDA were inflated due to conceptual similarity. Alternative measures that emphasize the distinctions between these constructs might assist in furthering conceptual clarity.

The current research expands the DA literature in non-Western cultures and strengthens links between the psychological constructs of personality traits and adult attachment styles as they relate to adaptation processes. Other research has shown that compassion can be induced in a laboratory setting (Mikulincer et al., 2003). Future studies could perhaps use an experimental design to study whether inducing self-compassion can increase DA among divorced women or men. Furthermore, it may be worthwhile to investigate the effectiveness of self-compassion training protocols on divorce adjustment DA. Future studies can also incorporate the current mediation model to examine how couples' relational trajectories evolve toward or away from divorce, and how one's self-compassion influences one's partner in light of the partner's attachment style.

Assuming our findings accurately reflect the temporal nature of the associations, study results might have important clinical implications. Some scholars

(Mallinckrodt, 2000) have suggested that counter-complimentary interventions during counseling or psychotherapy can help individuals with higher levels of attachment anxiety and avoidance. That is, counselors and psychotherapists can select counseling interventions (e.g., self-soothing) that are opposite to people's familiar patterns (e.g., engaging in negative self-talk). Because those with attachment anxiety tend to view themselves negatively and have a hyperactivated attachment system, they likely pay more attention to external sources or acceptance and care rather than using their inner capacity for self-care. Self-compassion strategies are fitting counter-complimentary strategies in such cases (Wei et al., 2011). Because those with avoidant attachment have working model of others and a deactivated attachment system (e.g., actively keeping distance from others or suppressing emotions of themselves), a fitting counter-complimentary strategy might be to help them learn new ways to react empathically to others' emotional experiences. In particular, counselors can serve as role models for treating divorced partners by demonstrating empathy toward divorced individuals. Higher empathetic ability might promote more positive feelings overall, and less negative feelings toward one's former spouse specifically, and contribute to higher divorce adjustment. Clearer evidence for such causal relationships from longitudinal and quasi-experimental or intervention research is needed. Given the growing divorce rate in places like Iran, the results of such research could be of great value toward promoting healthy adjustment to divorce.

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Open research statement

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